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UN Peacekeeper holds condom outside of condom wallet.

Revealing the Soldier: Peacekeeping and Prostitution

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In recent years the links between the presence of peacekeepers and the growth of prostitution in United Nation mission areas has received increased attention. In addition, and perhaps more disturbingly, a series of sexual violations against women and girls by peacekeepers have also been documented across the range of UN peacekeeping missions. These include the rape and murder of a 12 year-old Kosovo-Albanian girl by a UN peacekeeper, the alleged rape of a 10 year old Congolese girl by a Moroccan peacekeeper, the making of a pornographic film through the exploitation of a local woman by an Irish peacekeeper in Eritrea, and the high profile exchange of goods vital for survival — such as food and material for shelter — for sex by humanitarian workers and peacekeepers in refugee camps in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. These and numerous other reports appear to point to the flourishing of an aggressive sexuality that fails to discern between minors and adults, and that may even result in the rape and death of vulnerable female, and in some cases male civilians (such as occurred in Somalia) in conflict and post-conflict societies. It is important that we critically evaluate the sexual dynamics of peacekeeping contexts and at the same time recognize the valuable work that the UN continues to undertake.

The existence of prostitution and sexual violation of minors in mission areas is all the more shocking since it involves personnel in whom considerable trust is placed. To many, the peacekeeper is synonymous with security, and a sense of reassurance and professional commitment. This imagery is powerfully influenced by the media whose dominant representation of peacekeepers accords with the popular psyche in that they are typically presented as blue-bereted saviours of the war torn citizenry. Television pictures of peacekeepers holding babies, handing sweets to children and disarming militia foreground the softer and more positive side of mainly (military) men trained in the use of force.

The peacekeeper comes to symbolically represent the conscience of the international community, and in this way we may project onto them our hopes and desires for societies that have endured genocide, massacres and interminable suffering. It is hardly surprising then that perception of peacekeeper-identity tends towards a professional uni-dimensionality, as this links with their official activities in the public realm. Given this dominant portrayal, it is unsurprising that reactions to reports of sexual violations by peacekeepers invoke despair and outrage, and are rooted in a sense that these men have reneged on their moral duty in the most pernicious of ways. And yet thought of as "GIs," "squaddies" and "troops," the actions of a number of these peacekeepers towards women and girls begins to fit with a commonly held view that military hypermasculinity can impact negatively on particular members of a vulnerable civilian population.

Making Military Men

In order to begin to illuminate the factors that appear to dispose some peacekeepers to sexually exploit local women and girls, it is necessary to consider the dominant form of masculinity that is developed in the military. Broadly speaking, this serves to create and reinforce a firm distinction between the genders, and is expressed in the celebration of an aggressive and frequently misogynist heterosexuality. This gendered divide takes a multitude of forms, though typically treats the feminine as the inferior "other." The feminine is linked to poor performance, inadequacy, incompetence and weakness. In offsetting masculinity against femininity, the former is celebrated as all that the latter is not. Yet, the military is not unique in its gendered ideology; rather, it represents a microcosm and amplification of civilian institutions including the police force and fire service. It remains the case that, as Joshua Goldstein (1) argues, soldiers show an "almost universal preoccupation with sex," and that, particularly in times of war (and we might add, in times of peace), "most soldiers were ready to have sexual intercourse with any woman wherever they could."

Discussions about sex, images of sex, constant references to sex and the sexual conquest of women, are relayed graphically and frequently, functioning as the lynchpin upon which the soldiering profession turns. As the Canadian sociologist Deborah Harrison (2) has suggested: "the members of especially macho (military) units celebrate their shared maleness by objectifying women, viewing pornography films and joking about making women the targets of violence." In order to develop military masculine sexuality it is necessary for recruits to be exposed to an intense period of military socialisation.

This process starts prior to enlistment with the idea of the archetypal warrior figure whose tough, invulnerable and sexually potent persona is revered and celebrated throughout popular and other cultural mediums. Military recruits — in the main adolescent men — are already likely to be familiar with this aspect of soldiering from comic books and movies. Undoubtedly, many are motivated by the possibility that enlistment into the military will encourage the development of heterosexual virility through the organisation's association with the "making of men." Perhaps a number of enlistees are subconsciously seeking out an environment conducive to the fostering and attainment of manhood that many of their peers and family will quietly celebrate.

One aspect of military indoctrination that may also be of relevance to understanding the nature of gendered relations in and around military installations is the ability for troops to dehumanize the enemy or the "other." Women, as a socially subordinate group, are frequent victims of this othering as the Mai Lai massacre, in which US troops butchered women and girls in a Vietnamese village, graphically demonstrates. When a macho culture promoting aggressive heterosexuality is combined with strategies designed to strip away the humanity of others, the possibilities for sexual violation of women and girls increase significantly, and have recently been powerfully portrayed in the movie *Casualties of War*.

Variations on a Theme: Sexualities in the Military

When focusing on the sexuality of military personnel, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of the organization in terms of the existence of sexualities that come into sharp focus when subject to a more fine grained analysis. This is significant not only in respect to the more obvious distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality (a more liberal approach to homosexuality in the military has emerged on both side of the Atlantic in recent years), and the growing proportion of military women, but also in terms of how masculinity is performed. It is important to note that not all military men use prostitutes, or rape for example. Further, in discussing peacekeeping troops, there should be an acknowledgement that nationalities may differ in how they manage gendered relations together with the extent to which they view women and girls as subordinate. It is all too easy to work with a monolithic understanding of military masculine heterosexuality that may limit policy responses intended to modify the more destructive variants of peacekeeper's impact on gendered relations. In addition to rank, there may also be differences in the ways that Military Observers (commissioned officers) manage their sexuality when contrasted with the heterosexual performances of members of the contingent personnel (non-commissioned ranks who guard UN assets). The former may exercise discretion in their sexual liaisons, while contingent soldiers tend to celebrate their heterosexuality in public in bars and brothels, easily identifiable in their uniform and large groups.

Cynthia Enloe (3) has written about the military's support of prostitution in close proximity to its bases, or in zones designated for the rest and recreation of officers and men. Throughout the extensive history of the close relationship between camp following women and the military, the psychological and health interests of military men have been prioritised over those of the women whose role it is to provide a vital sexual outlet, whilst being under medical surveillance by the military authorities. This control and monitoring of militarized prostitutes has involved oppressive practices, including the use of degrading examinations through which their part in the spreading of sexually transmitted diseases has been highlighted, whilst the role of the men in this process has been ignored. The direct and unapologetic involvement of the military in prostitution lies in its belief systems that turn on a particular understanding of male sexuality.

To deny their men this sexual "safety valve" for a natural and barely controllable sex drive, is to court serious problems, in which aggressive heterosexuality might prove dysfunctional. According to the military, denial of sex could result in a significant diminution in combat effectiveness as, in the absence of heterosexual activity, military men are unable to affirm all aspects of their warrior-hood. Unscientific theories abound concerning testosterone levels and potential for aggression in respect of regular sexual intercourse, though there is little credible empirical evidence to support such a proposition. More disturbingly, (so far as the military are concerned), is the possibility that men who are denied heterosexual contact, born of sheer desperation, will seek out homosexual liaisons with soldier colleagues. In this scenario, it is envisaged that the military masculine "glue" cementing unit cohesion is likely to melt away, rendering impotent the now feminized fighting force. Thus, male sexuality in the military is akin to a truck whose brakes have failed. The best that can be hoped for is to steer it onto the correct highway; alternative routes are bound to result in disaster.

Exchanges of Sharp Inequality: Peacekeepers and Prostitution

In contemporary debates, the question of prostitution divides commentators. The two extreme positions are represented by the notion that either: all prostitution represents violence to women, or: that women should be free to choose what they do with their bodies seeing commercial sex as a form of sexual labour. Military thinking errs towards the latter position, and the frequent retort that poverty stricken women are gaining financially from their interactions with peacekeepers is used to obscure the harsh realities of survival sex work. Many women and girls are forced into this form of income generation when faced with life and death circumstances for themselves and their families. Another argument made by the broad spectrum of prostitute clients — including military men — is that the women are "very active" in attracting their custom. The argument is made that because prostitutes "come on to you readily...and tell you that you are handsome" it is the woman and not the peacekeeper who is responsible for the exchange. In this way, peacekeepers are able to cast themselves as "helpless victims" with a biologically powerful sex drive that prostitutes "exploit."

There has been rather less discussion, at least in terms of those who might be described as military apologists, for the wide-scale existence of prostitution across the unique and frequently dysfunctional context of the peacekeeping mission. The post-conflict environment is one in which gendered relations are heavily distorted, and peacekeeper's involvement with prostitutes represents an exchange of fundamental financial inequality. For example in terms of sharp financial disparity, in the MONUC mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Mission Subsistence Allowance for UN peacekeeper Military Observers and some other UN civilian personnel is \$138 per day, whereas the average *annual* income per head of Congolese citizen is \$100. Such inequalities fuel the commodification of women and girls, many of whom bare the full brunt of conflict, and — as was witnessed during the Balkan War and currently in the DRC — are raped as a key strategy designed to weaken the enemy's morale. A number of these rapes may result in pregnancy and the birth of babies who then place an additional burden on an already traumatized survivor of sexual violation. Many of these women become locked into a cycle of prostitution in terms both of the pressure to support a young family, and also facilitated by the damage to the mother's self esteem; she may become resigned to meeting the sexual demands of UN clients. These factors, along with the age of consent and of marriage in

both Sierra Leone and the DRC (currently 14 years of age), contribute towards the cocktail of circumstances in which peacekeeper abuse is likely.

Closing Comments

Kofi Annan, in responding to the scandals that continue to damage the UN's reputation, has called for a climate of "zero tolerance" with regard to the activities of peacekeeper violation of women and girls. However, there is ambiguity here as it is not entirely clear if prostitution is exempt from this strategy. In recent years, across all peacekeeping missions, various Codes of Conduct have been formulated. The generic UN "Blue Helmets Code of Conduct" states that "peacekeepers will never commit any act that could result in sexual harm to members of the local population including women and children." Codes that reflect the particular conditions of the mission area (for example the age of consent and marriage), have also been drawn up, along with the establishment of committees (for example the UNAMSIL mission in Sierra Leone) whose terms of reference are specifically to monitor and highlight the issue of peacekeeper exploitation of women and girls. These codes use the language of 'strict prohibition' of sexual contact with minors and of sexual exploitation of local women and girls by UN personnel' and are uncompromising in their tone. They also suggest that *bona fide* relationships between peacekeepers and local women over 18 are acceptable. Clearly, the codes are open to interpretation, not least because they are intended for a multinational audience who vary in their understandings of cultural norms and the nuances of language.

Ultimately, the UN is attempting to regulate the sexuality of its personnel, and particularly its peacekeepers whose reputation for exploitation is of greater visibility than that of civilian staff. In this way, the UN stands at the interface of troop contributing countries and concerned onlookers, who consider that prostitution in a post-war setting is unacceptable for personnel who have unique responsibilities. If it is considered that prostitution and exploitation are inseparable, then, for many, these codes are unworkable. Soldiering and prostitution — argued by some to be the "two oldest professions" feed off one another and exist in a symbiotic relationship that can only be detached by resorting to — according to the military — oppressive practice such as turning troop barracks into virtual prisons. If, however, prostitution is not considered as exploitation, then the codes have some chance of success, and the masculinized culture of the UN retains a key outlet for certain elements of its personnel.

It would appear that the aggressive heterosexuality of a significant number of peacekeepers is somewhat unique. Yet in many ways, the activities of these men differ little from those of sex tourists, for example. Similar conditions prevail, extreme inequality, minors often feature as the preferred option of men (and some women), and the justification for taking part in these activities resonates with sentiments offered up by peacekeepers.

Finally, this essay should not be taken as a condemnation of the work of the UN, as undoubtedly its interventions over the years have proved crucial to the preservation of life and the creation of peace. However, the UN, caught as it is between national militaries on whom it depends for peacekeepers, and demands by those deemed to be 'outsiders' that they significantly temper the aggressive heterosexuality of these troops, prove largely irreconcilable and a key fault line in the nexus linking national militaries, the UN and members of wider societies who seek accountability. One place to start, and here we add to a growing clamour for action of this sort, is for the perpetrators of sexual violation against women and girls to be brought to rapid and decisive justice. The impunity they currently enjoy sits closely with the notion that these men really are at the whim of a biological drive that can over-ride their sense of moral duty.

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1 Joshua Goldstein (2001) *War and Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2 Deborah Harrison (2003) 'Violence in the Military Community' in Paul Higate (ed.) *Military Masculinities: Identity and the State*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.

3 Cynthia Enloe (1999) *Maneuvers. The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. California: University of California Press.